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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABU DHABI 001567

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SCUL](#) [AE](#)

SUBJECT: UAE DISMISSES ACADEMICS WITH PRESUMED ISLAMIST
LEANINGS

REF: A) ABU DHABI 1445 (MAJAN.NET CLOSURE)
B) ABU DHABI 1224 (AL-ROKEN)
C) 06 ABU DHABI 3904 (FNC ELECTORATE SELECTION)
D) 06 ABU DHABI 3140 (BOUCHER WITH MBZ/ABZ)
E) 06 ABU DHABI 790 (HUMAN RIGHTS NGO)

Classified by CDA Martin Quinn, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) Summary: Reports of educators removed from the classroom for alleged "Islamist" tendencies are circulating in the UAE, with estimates of the number of those dismissed reaching as high as 92. One English teacher well known to the PA Section was told not to report to work when the new semester began. In separate conversations, PolOffs spoke with a professor from UAE University and a lawyer active in human rights cases (himself banned from teaching and publishing in the UAE); both noted the risks of edging out experienced UAE national teachers and drifting towards vocational (western, English-based, secular, and technically-oriented) training at the expense of preparing minds with creative thinking capacity. (Both may have an axe to grind with the UAEG, or a case of sour grapes over their personal situations, yet they represent a potentially influential alternative view.) The lawyer lamented the suppression of civil society as well. Another human rights activist supported the dismissal of Islamists who "exploit" their position to spread an ideology, to the detriment of secular education goals. Post also understands that the UAE military is enforcing stricter policies on the length of beards to cull out religious extremists. End summary.

12. (C) Freedom of expression is not assured in the UAE and, according to recent reports, increasingly not tolerated by the government in the academic arena. An Emirati English teacher with whom the Public Affairs Section had extensive dealings was told on the eve of the new school year that he was no longer permitted in the classroom and would be transferred to a ministry that had nothing to do with education. The rationale for this sudden notice to Mr. Salem al-Haliyan in Ras al-Khaimah appears to be his participation in the religious group "Reform and Guidance" ("Islah wa Towjih" in Arabic). Mr. al-Haliyan said he was one of five teachers in Ras al-Khaimah suddenly barred from teaching. (Comment: Through Post's interaction with Mr. al-Haliyan, we knew he was a devout Muslim, but his approach to education has been balanced and does not appear "extreme"; he has participated in PD programs promoting English and U.S. culture and supported Ministry of Education plans to divert time from Islamic studies to English study. End comment.)

13. (C) On September 9, UAE University Political Science professor Ebtisam al-Kitbi (protect) told PolOffs that in fact 92 educators, including Ministry of Education officials, had been told not to report to work as the new semester began. An unknown number of nationals are reportedly among those dismissed. Mohammed al-Roken, a lawyer active in human rights cases who has been banned from teaching or publishing

in the UAE since 2002, told PolOffs September 9 that Internet chatter put the number of educators recently dismissed at 83.

Regardless of the actual number, a number of academics, including nationals, are reportedly paying a price for their views. (Comment: Reports of 60 or more educators removed from the classroom for extremist leanings circulated in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001. When this happens to foreign teachers (many Egyptians at the time), the UAE can simply terminate contracts and deport them. Emiratis losing teaching jobs raises the stakes somewhat. They are an enduring, educated, and potentially outspoken part of society that cannot be distanced so easily. End comment.)

¶4. (C) The next generation is also paying a price, said al-Roken, having seen his own daughter denied a scholarship he felt she clearly deserved after graduating with honors in business administration (ref B). Al-Roken said he was aware of multiple cases in which the Minister of Higher Education, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak al-Nahyan, approved a scholarship based on merit (as was the case with al-Roken's daughter), only to have "security" veto the award. (Note: The same security reportedly vetted the list of 6,000-plus Emiratis allowed to compete and vote in the December 2006 Federal National Council election, ref C. That list tellingly included no academics, in spite of their qualifications. Al-Kitbi even stated that the appointed Shura Council of Saudi Arabia has a higher level of discourse than the "elected" FNC due to the superior academic credentials of its members. End note.)

¶5. (C) Al-Kitbi noted that angst among UAE national educators is compounded by a sense that creative thought is no longer a goal -- or even permitted -- in an education system increasingly oriented towards technical skills. Many

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institutions insist that teaching be in English; Emirati teachers feel outnumbered and disadvantaged by foreign faculty as a result. By some accounts, the native language skills of Emiratis are not being developed to a level that might facilitate mature expression. Al-Roken commented that many young nationals were losing their expressive identity, with 50% capacity in Arabic and English and 100% in neither.

¶6. (C) One headmistress who was dismissed, according to al-Roken, appeared on TV complaining that the UAEG kicks out experienced nationals and brings in "Canadian fugitives," an apparent reference to a recently-employed educator from Canada who was running from outstanding arrest warrants at home. She argued that UAE national teachers, some of whom had won awards for their work, were amply qualified to educate the next generation.

¶7. (C) Sheikh Nahyan regrettably focuses only on the labor market in setting academic goals, said al-Kitbi, sour on the weakening of debate in the classroom. Sheikh Nahyan sees no need for literature or humanities, she continued, creating a gap in those areas, which engenders increased resentment among professorial circles. That resentment in turn pushes many in a more conservative direction, she said, citing the danger of shutting off open debate as was the case, in her view, in the closure of a popular web blog (ref A).

¶8. (C) Secretary General of the Emirates Human Rights Association, Mohammed Ghubash, told PolOffs September 19 that six ("of the 80" or so) dismissed educators had appealed to the Association for assistance. (He said all 80 were Emiratis, as expatriate teachers had been "dealt with" previously.) Ghubash said he welcomed the dismissal of the teachers, was pleased that education would remain "neutral" and not "politicized," and told them they had no right to exploit their profession in an effort to spread their ideology. He offered them no assistance, adding to PolOff that it was the Islamists who fought against English as a teaching medium and jeopardized secular education goals.

¶9. (C) The dismissal of a large number of educators is still informal (or extra-legal), said al-Roken, as they were told not to report for duty in the absence of a formal decision. He claimed that 52 teachers were pressed to take early retirement in 2002; he had helped 12 of them sue for reinstatement and the case is now before the UAE Supreme Court. He was cautiously hopeful that some may win reinstatement. Capricious dismissals are creating hatred among UAE nationals, said al-Roken.

¶10. (C) Al-Roken tells a troublingly similar story of a once "thriving" civil society now restrained by the tightened grip of "the executive." His own desire to start a human rights NGO in the 1990's was suppressed by the clear risk of a "no" from the government. He and his colleagues therefore formed a committee within the existing Jurists' Association and effectively did "much work" that an NGO might accomplish. He finally risked the application process in 2005 to open an NGO and has received no reply. (Note: The UAEG did permit formation of another "Emirates Human Rights Association" in February 2006 with officers more acceptable to the authorities, ref E. End note.)

¶11. (C) Asked what he thought was the impact of UAEG scripting of Friday mosque sermons, al-Roken laughed and asked who would voluntarily attend a sermon to hear the sterile government bottom line. One had nothing to look forward to but the prayers, he said. He did not elaborate when asked if disaffected worshippers might go underground and organize their own religious discussions. (We hear reports of imams giving private sermons under the patronage of some female members of the ruling family, who are likely not approved by the security forces and who have reportedly been more fiery and "Islamist" in their teachings.)

¶12. (C) Post has also learned of at least one case of a military officer dismissed for Islamist behavior manifest in a longer beard and shorter robe than traditionally worn by Emiratis. The military, by some accounts, is instituting stricter policies on the trimming of beards.

¶13. (C) Comment: The UAE is committed to secularizing education, as Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) and his brother, Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed (AbZ), outlined for a USG visitor last year (ref D). They said the UAE had stopped sending Islamic Studies students to Saudi Arabia due to extreme views among the faculties there, sent fewer students to other Arab states where religion was sometimes addressed in "strange ways," and would soon require public school teachers in Abu Dhabi to go through training courses and obtain teaching licenses (a licensing process

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that would not be based on education credentials alone, but involve approval by "other agencies"). AbZ noted the sensitivities of the teaching profession, in which "wrong influences" and "twisted minds" can be dangerous. "We cannot have radical Muslims running our schools, no matter what subjects they know." While these comments were offered in the context of education in Abu Dhabi in particular, Abu Dhabi's funding of the federal government gives it influence throughout the country.

¶14. (C) Comment continued: It is difficult to assess what objective standards, if any, the UAE is using to cull the ranks of academics, yet we consistently hear that "security" (the "other agency" referred to by AbZ) has a role in the vetting process.

¶15. (C) Comment continued: The UAE populace is by no means liberal in a western sense, yet within a moderately conservative Islamic environment it is largely permissive of the somewhat secular UAEG approach to governance. The UAEG seeks stability and prosperity by clipping the wings of educators and thinkers who stray too far from support of the implied "ruling bargain," by which rulers rule in exchange

for providing for the needs of the populace. Most UAE nationals benefit from a highly comfortable quality of life and go along with the bargain, founded in ruling-family patronage. The few who speak out discover the cost of free expression. By edging out "troublesome" teachers, preachers, and writers, the UAEG hopes to limit the impact of these few voices before an organized opposition to the ruling bargain emerges. Labor unions are restricted for somewhat similar reasons.

¶16. (C) Comment continued: Whether the long-term net effect of this policy is a disaffected minority turning to more extreme and/or even violent forms of expression, or simply the suppression of the variety of creative thinking that might lead the nation to discover new solutions to societal problems as the UAE commutes between tradition and modernity (with an abiding love for both), it would be in the UAE's best interests to avoid sealing off expression to the point that societal release valves close and pressure builds. Any society needs to let off steam, especially a society steaming along with ambitious economic growth plans that rapidly import global values antithetical to the tribal socio-religious tradition of the Gulf.

¶17. (C) Comment continued: Finally, although the USG should sympathize with the UAEG desire to keep truly extremist views from spreading, we must also emphasize that stability and prosperity over the long term will require openness to the greatest extent possible. End comment.
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